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Plagiarism as a Cross-Cultural Phenomenon

The real mystery of writing, like all forms of creativity, is that we don't know what makes it happen. Where did he find the words? *we marvel rhetorically over an arresting passage. More rare and therefore shocking are those moments when we come upon a paragraph and can say factually, declaratively,* I know where he got that. (Mallon, 2001)

When explaining the requirements of a research paper to students, American faculty commonly include the admonition, "Don't plagiarize!" Yet because all of us in recent times have come to recognize that the issues of academic integrity are dynamic and complex, we should also be aware that whether we are hearing about copyright infringement through Napster or appropriation of computer code by graduate student programmers, the subject is more complex and stratified than the brief warning issued in our classes might indicate.

Indeed, when we make such a simple statement, we may be operating under certain faulty assumptions, and by so doing, we trivialize a complicated Western communal value that has economic, political, and cultural ramifications. Since 1710 when law in England formally decreed that authors, as well as publishers, were entitled to financial reward by means of copyright (Rose, 1994), we in Western societies have recognized that intellectual innovation resulting in published material is primarily a for-profit endeavor; as such, we confirm that the ideas and words of an author have economic value as property. Consequently, the incentive for intellectual effort is compensation, either as financial remuneration or professional attribution. As Americans, we hold this tenet as an assumption so fundamental and so near that very few of us recognize the economic rationale we present when we offer our warning to students.

We may often also fail to recognize that political and historical issues have an impact on our own concerns with plagiarism. Through the years, research has reported on the use of *verbatim* material to share the wisdom of great scholars by certain Asian cultures (LaFleur, 1999; Leki, 1992; Qu,

2002); this usage has resulted in a communal recognition of sources by the educated elite, with attribution seen merely as an exercise in redundancy. Copying of works without citation has remained a common and frequent academic practice throughout all levels of education in many non-U.S. cultures. Furthermore, direct language use has another frequent application, having often been used to intimidate and command consensus. For example, an editorial style presenting an argument such as, "We all know that Tibet is part of China," offers no opportunity for disagreement, and seeking a source for such communal understanding would undermine the expected and necessary acquiescence and obedience (Leki, 1992).

Further complications for the use of published language and attribution expectations are often based in economic practices, for example, in present-day Communist and post-Soviet environments. In these settings, economic restrictions have historically disallowed individuals from owning personal property, much less from recognizing the abstract and complex notion of *intellectual property*. Only very recently have citizens in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Baltic States begun to take out first-time mortgages on their living quarters, and as a result, they have begun to tangibly recognize the economics of personal property.

This complex awareness for the cultural abstraction of intellectual property was made tangible and put into some historical and personal perspective for the researchers when incidents at one of the most prestigious educational institutions in the Baltics were observed. On several occasions, students were found to be covertly copying from each other and comparing composition lengths on free-writing assignments (a warm-up invention strategy), even though there was no grade advantage to be gained. When questioned, the group-held defense was, "We do it this way! We always do it this way! We copy and our teachers all know we just do it!" With further confirmation from many of their regular teachers, we found that communal understanding has supported the notion of copying without attribution, regardless of the circumstances and across generations, and has made this collective practice socially acceptable.

After these incidents and after intellectual property and plagiarism concerns became a topic of formal academic lecture, a student at the same prestigious institute responded with, "You Americans do not own everything! The Internet says *www*—World Wide Web. We can use whatever we want!" He was reticent to accept the notion that using material with documentation was acceptable but using published material as one's own was not.

However, new administrators of the same institution have not supported this student opinion and have worked diligently to rout it out through education and judicial reviews. Seeking to conform with Western values, these educators have considered academic integrity requisite for participation in the global economic community (i.e., the European Union), and consequently the administrators expelled several students for these offenses as examples. In the PRC, participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO) has also raised China's recent serious attention toward trademark and copyright issues (Qu,

2002); yet, few educators are well prepared in either the legal or pedagogical issues, as we have observed during multiple teacher-training visits. In fact, a major reason we have been invited to share our knowledge with teachers and students in these neighboring global communities has been the desire for a "midpond" understanding in the Baltics and an awareness of North American expectations in Asia, especially in regard to creativity and originality. In the long run, the global push toward a free market economy may well be its own incentive, again with the capitalistic notion that originality demands compensation. However, we have seen and are aware that rejection of long-held practices and beliefs requires time and explicit instructional effort.

Indeed, the instant access to published material on the Internet undermines to a large degree the arguments we as faculty present against freely downloading without citation. What once required lengthy effort to at least retype a segment of another's written work to appropriate it now requires only a quick cut-and-paste maneuver. As a consequence, the respect for the creation of text has diminished along with appreciation of the author's effort. And with this weakened respect for the text, the attention required for accurate documentation has also been minimized. Indeed, students often lack the skills and the awareness to tackle the time-consuming procedure of citation (i.e., complex URL, date of access, etc.), usually requiring a discipline-specific format (Lathrop & Foss, 2000).

Many of our deeply underlying assumptions color our responses and thereby students' attitudes. First, we as faculty assume that students have been taught documentation throughout their prior education; thus, we do not see the necessity for direct instruction. But when student performance fails to match our expectations for discipline-specific documentation, we might ask ourselves, "From where should the students have obtained this knowledge?" Second, when few faculty respond with punitive sanctions in confronting a possible or confirmed offender, what message is being sent and received? Hidden beneath this response may be the fear that in today's litigious American society, the protections and recourse that faculty have are unclear. Not at all hidden, though, is the fear of overwhelming additional work, knowing that six months or more may be required for paperwork on such an accusation. The lack of specific guidelines for faculty and students at all levels may be responsible for some disparity between academic expectations and performance.

Working Definitions

When we consider the problem of plagiarism on university campuses today, we often make the naive assumptions that all university students share the same definitions of the term, that they all have the competence through prior education to correctly document their work, and that they will consistently do so. However, upon closer investigation, we have found that students do not understand the concept of plagiarism; in particular, we have learned that they do not know or agree with the full scope of the concept usually

found in writing handbooks. Therefore, ranging from the most obvious and easily understood to the more elusive, the commonly held definitions of plagiarism that have formed the base of our research include *failure to document* the following: 1)*Verbatim* material (word by word) and enclosed in quotation marks; 2) Paraphrased material (the author's words transposed into another's to simplify or summarize) that retains the author's meaning; and 3) Ideas specific to an author (and not commonly held).

Survey

The survey research sought to reveal student understanding of plagiarism through recognition of definitions, as well as attitudes and practices. Selected as a sample of convenience, the survey was conducted in four countries where the researchers were teaching and were able to personally collect the data. A brief survey (see Appendix) was distributed to 645 university students in their respective university English classes: the US (n=268) (in California); the People's Republic of China (n=164); Latvia (n=108); and Lithuania (n=105). Both the American and the Latvian samplings were ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous groupings, notable especially in Latvia where the population included Russian, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian students; the Chinese and Lithuanian populations were somewhat homogeneous. While the students in the Latvian, Lithuanian, and American groups represented varied and numerous majors, the students in the Chinese group were all English majors, and consequently, had all been exposed to English documentation practices. The data collected from Latvia are exceptional in that the Latvian sample had been exposed to four weeks of direct instruction in academic writing and detailed documentation practice before the data collection; thus these findings may be seen to be "skewed" by their education. The other groups were not treated in any exceptional manner.

Findings and Conclusions

The survey questions, designed to elicit student responses in the areas pertaining to plagiarism (i.e., definition, attitude, and practice), presented findings that, although predictable to some extent, were unanticipated in many respects. We were particularly surprised about the assumptions we made regarding our own American student population. In the following discussion, we will focus on the student responses most salient to understanding and management of the concerns.

Definition

In response to questions regarding the definition of plagiarism, the study discloses nothing unexpected in the student answers to the most obvious meaning of the concept, namely, that copying constitutes plagiarism.

Figure 1
Definition: Does Copying = Plagiarism?
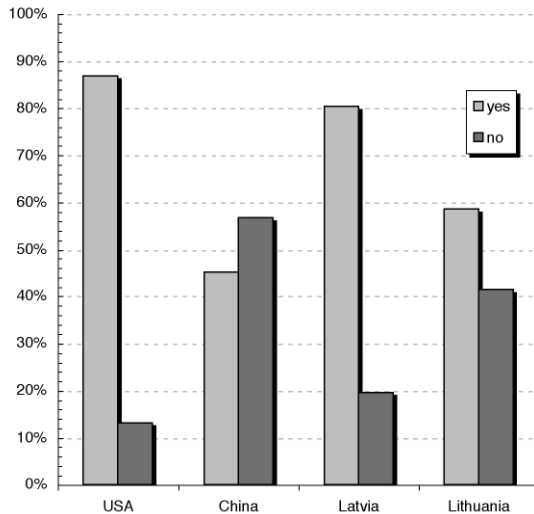
A majority of U.S. students (87%) understand that *verbatim* copying without appropriate documentation does indeed constitute plagiarism, as shown in Figure 1. At the same time, considering the cultural values and pedagogical practices of the People's Republic of China, it is entirely understandable that less than half (43%) of the Chinese students consider copying to be plagiarism. As for the Baltic nations, in Lithuania, fewer than two thirds (59%) of the responses acknowledge copying to be plagiarism, while in Latvia, 80% of the students agree with this definition of the concept, demonstrating the impact of direct instruction. However, in spite of careful training, 20% of the Latvian population still refused to change its perspective, hinting at the complexity of plagiarism. Without an understanding of the far-reaching economic consequences of the concept, why would students readily adopt the notion merely on the word of an American instructor or any similar directive found in a handbook or syllabus?

The results from the question regarding paraphrasing were somewhat unexpected. The data in Figure 2 clearly show that nearly half (48%) of the U.S. student population believes that changing the syntax and words of an author's text is sufficient to proclaim ownership, thus eliminating the need for documentation. Notable is the similarity of the U.S. response to the Chinese student response, in which 55% deem paraphrasing to be the same as invention. Predictably, in Lithuania, where collectivism has prevailed, two thirds of the student population asserts that restating does not necessitate crediting a source. In Latvia, despite being carefully taught, nearly one third (28%) of the

Figure 2
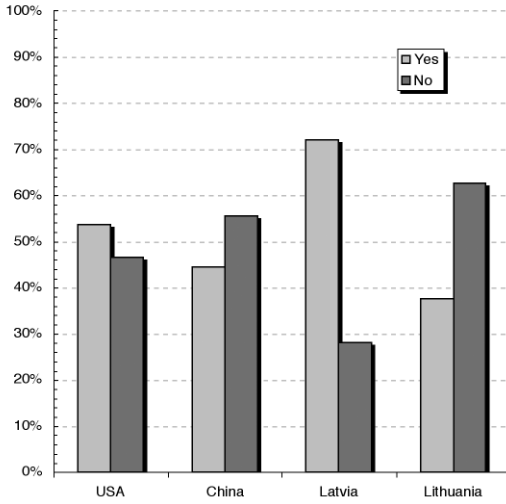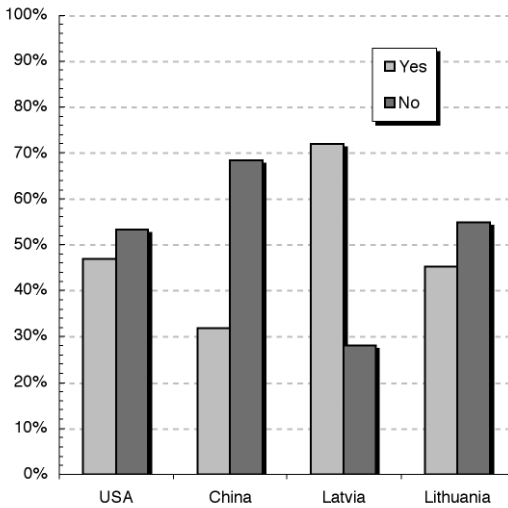## Definition: Does Rewording w/o Crediting = Plagiarism?

Figure 3
Definition: Does Using Ideas w/o Crediting = Plagiarism?

students still resisted viewing paraphrasing without citation as plagiarism. The latter data argue for instruction over time to integrate understanding with application and eventual common practice.

Regarding the most problematic definition of plagiarism, data in Figure 3 reveal that for a majority of students, ideas do not constitute private property. More than half (53%) of the U.S. students find appropriation and use of someone else's ideas as their own to be acceptable. Not surprisingly, for more than two thirds of the Chinese students and for nearly two thirds of the Lithuanian students, for whom the idea of private ownership is a very recent phenomenon, ideas belong to the collective. Again, in Latvia, their recent education accounts for the 72% who agree with the definition. Yet, again, there is still a strong element of resistance (28%) to the notion.

For those of us who assumed that American students—products of and participants in a society where individual rights and private property are sacrosanct—are better informed, the findings regarding the definitions of plagiarism are sobering. It appears that we may have failed to instill in our young people some of the values that ensure the continuing prosperity of our society.

Attitudes

In an examination of student response to questions regarding attitudes toward plagiarism, the data in Figures 4 through 6 exhibit the degree to which societal values and pedagogical practices influence attitude. Of students asked to consider the moral implication of plagiarism by equating it with cheating, we find that only two thirds of U.S. students deem it morally wrong. Fully one third (combined 22% *No* with 13% *Don't know*) do not believe that an act of plagiarism is synonymous with dishonesty. On the other hand, the Chinese students' response (57%) is consistent with the cultural values of their society in which copying is a pedagogical practice as well as a mark of respect for traditional wisdom.

When asked if plagiarism is acceptable in academic work, 95% of the Latvian students responded negatively. Their almost-unanimous response shows the consequence of direct instruction. A strong majority (75%) of the U.S. student response demonstrates awareness of plagiarism and its relationship to the notion of academic integrity. However, one fourth of the same population (combined 8% *Yes* with 17% *Maybe*) seems less certain. Where were they, we wonder, when their teachers lectured about the significance of academic integrity and the dire consequences of transgression?

When asked if they know someone who has plagiarized, the Chinese and Baltic students' responses are remarkably similar for students who live in distant parts of the world. In all three of these cases, two thirds of the students admit to knowing someone who has plagiarized. However, in the US, only 37% of the students readily admit to direct knowledge of plagiarism, while a nearly one-third segment (27%) responds with a timid *Maybe*. Ideally, we could conclude that few students in the US plagiarize; therefore, fewer students would know someone who has done so. Yet the similarity of the other

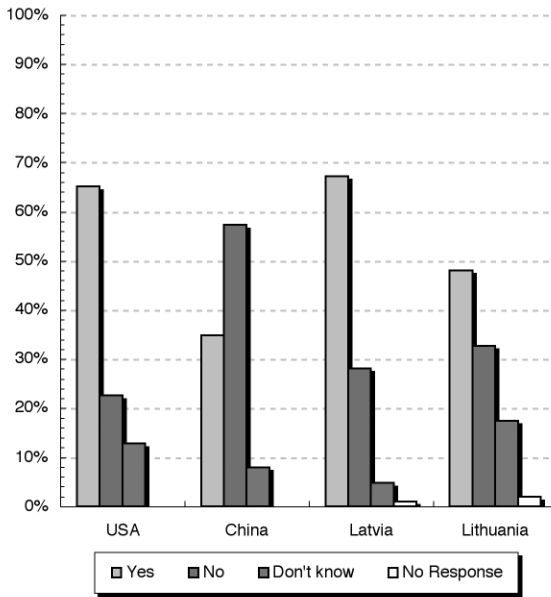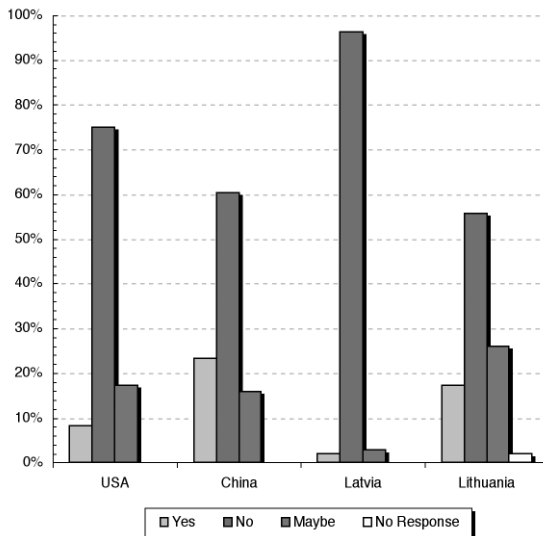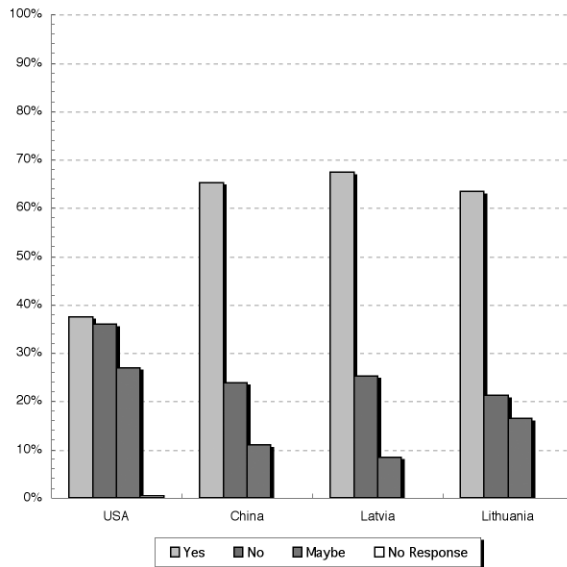**Figure 4**
Attitude: Is Plagiarism *Cheating*?

Figure 5
Attitude: Is Plagiarism Acceptable in Academic Work?

three populations leads us to suspect that societal values may also influence the answers. In the US, students are aware of the negative connotations and consequences of plagiarism; therefore, they may be reluctant to admit to such an action, even to a peer. However, students in the other countries may feel freer to admit to something that is not considered reprehensible by their peers and by the society.

Figure 6
Attitude: Do You Know People Who Plagiarize?

Practice

Figures 7 through 9 illustrate student response to matters of practice regarding plagiarism. The questions probed the possibility of, the reasons for, and the sources of plagiarism. Figure 7 reveals that neither social sanctions, nor negative moral connotations, nor even limited direct instruction are sufficiently compelling to prevent one third of the U.S. and Latvian populations from resorting to plagiarism when given the opportunity. The survey also highlights the decisive role played by politics and economics in shaping behavior. Despite geographical distance and different cultural norms, two thirds of the Chinese and Lithuanian students would or might plagiarize if they could.

Figure 7
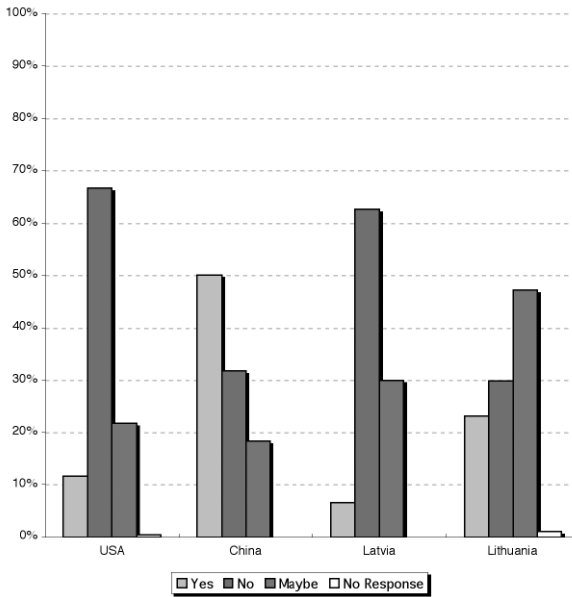**Practice: Would You Use Work w/o Giving Credit?**

Figure 8
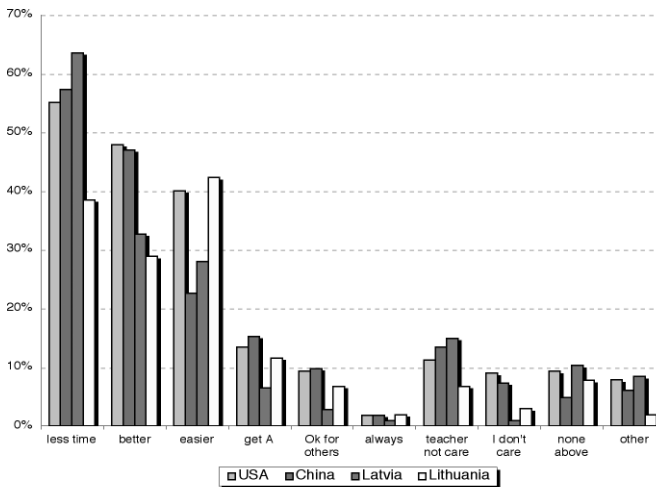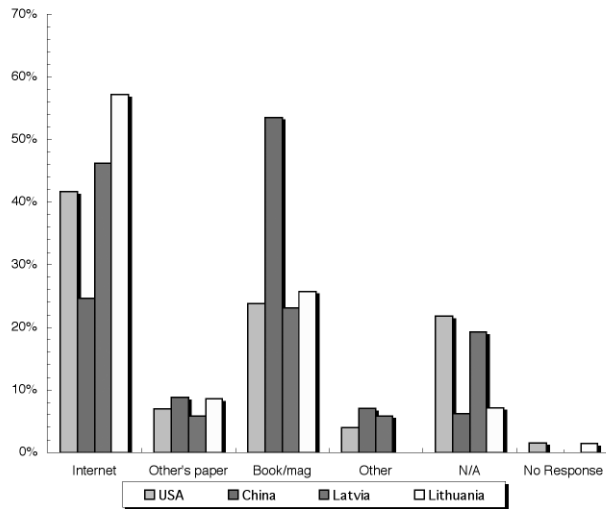**Practice: What Would Be Your Primary Reason for Using Another's Work?**

Figure 9
**Practice: What Source Would You Use as Your Own?**

When asked why they would plagiarize, all student populations noted in Figure 8 cited the most obvious reasons: It takes less time to complete an assignment, the ideas and writing are better, and it is easier than having to produce original work. Interestingly, quite a number of students in all the countries (more than 10% in the US, almost 15% in China, nearly 20% in Latvia) believe that teachers do not care. While consistent with the worldview in China and the Baltic States, this is an unexpected response from our U.S. population and seriously undermines our assumption that the American academic system carefully educates our students on the value of academic integrity.

Predictably, when asked to specify the most likely source they would use if they were to plagiarize, nearly one half or more of the students in all regions except China (China 25%, US 42%, Latvia 46%, Lithuania 57%) chose the Internet. Their response confirms the ever-increasing role technology plays in the practice of plagiarism and accounts for the escalating concern expressed by faculty on U.S. campuses. The discrepancy in the responses by the Chinese students, who selected printed material as their source for plagiarism, is evidence of still-limited access to technology dictated by a poorer economy and a repressive regime. However, the situation is changing rapidly as China moves closer to a free market economy and seeks to become a principal player in global affairs.

Finally, responding to a question regarding treatment of those found guilty of plagiarism, most students favored a mild, slap-on-the-wrist form of punishment, hinting that they do not consider the act to constitute a serious

offense or breach of trust. Regardless of geography or culture, more than half of the students, nearly 60% in the US, believe a warning, or perhaps a failing grade on the plagiarized assignment, to be an adequate penalty. Very few, only 3% in the US and none in Lithuania, consider the act to warrant anything as harsh as suspension or expulsion. However, a sizable group of students in every country replied that taking a class would be an appropriate response. This reaction, particularly notable in Latvia where the students had been exposed to the benefits of direct instruction, suggests a solution to the problem.

Figure 10
Practice: What Should Be the Punishment
for Students Caught Plagiarizing?
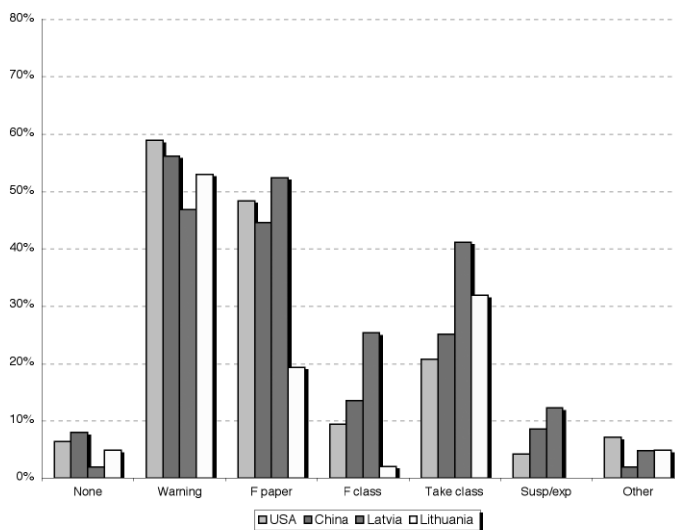
Implications

Drawing from the survey findings, it becomes clear that we must consider the issue of plagiarism in terms of both culture and pedagogy to modify student understanding, attitude, and practice.

Confirmation that U.S. students were no more aware of the complex definitions of plagiarism than students in other parts of the world requires that we reconsider our assumptions and practices. Latvian student responses reveal the positive impact of direct instruction while also suggesting that time and continuing education may be necessary to overcome resistance and ensure assimilation. The degree to which the definitions were understood by students in China and Lithuania reveals the other end of a continuum, where cultural and social acceptance are beginning, but where education regarding documentation expectations and practices is both limited and novel (although desired as teachers have expressed to us).

With regard to student attitudes, we find that to instill new values, social attitudes must undergo change. In the US, where social sanctions are stronger, there is less evidence of plagiarism; in China and Lithuania, where communal values support collectivism, students do not recognize the moral or ethical connotations inherent in the Western interpretation of plagiarism. In contrast is the response from the Latvian sample, which, as a result of intense educational treatment, was nearly unanimous in its acceptance of the concept of academic integrity. This is particularly noteworthy in light of similarities to its Lithuanian neighbor, with respect to their common ethnic, linguistic, political, and historical experiences, and to their mutual desire for eventual participation in the European Union.

Concerns arise from the student response to questions regarding their practice. Internationally, most students did admit they might plagiarize if given the opportunity since they may not know what plagiarism exactly is, how to avoid it, how to document correctly, and that it might be faster, easier, and result in better writing. As we know, students' main source is the ready access of the Internet, with China also moving quickly in that direction. Notable is the student perception that faculty do not care sufficiently about academic integrity. This may suggest that documentation is not directly taught in advance and that acts of plagiarism elicit weak response from faculty after the fact. This finding implies that both faculty and students may require more training and institutional support.

The survey research drawn from four different nations around the world leads us to conclude that despite the fact that documentation of sources has previously been a Western concept, now as the world moves to a global market economy, it is rapidly becoming an international concern. This conclusion may require the development of a new global community value—with education as the key.

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Acknowledgments

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Appendix
Student Survey

Please check the appropriate boxes:

1. In your opinion, what does *plagiarism* mean? **Please check all that apply:**
    - ❑ a. Copying someone else's written work, word for word, without giving the author credit
    - ❑ b. Rewording someone else's written work to alter it slightly, without giving the author credit
    - ❑ c. Rewording someone else's written work to alter it slightly, and giving the author credit
    - ❑ d. Using someone else's ideas without giving credit
    - ❑ e. Not sure
    - ❑ f. None of the above
    - ❑ g. Other (specify)_____

2. Is plagiarism the same as cheating?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No
    - ❑ I don't know

3. Is plagiarism acceptable in academic work?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No
    - ❑ I don't know

4. Do you know people who plagiarize?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No
    - ❑ I don't know

5. Would you ever use someone else's written or verbal work without giving credit?
    - ❑ Yes
    - ❑ No
    - ❑ Maybe

6. If you were to use another person's work as your own, what would be your primary reason? **(Check all that apply):**
    - ❑ a. Reduces time spent on assignment
    - ❑ b. The wording in the other source sounds better than mine
    - ❑ c. It's easier
    - ❑ d. I'm sure I would get an A/a high mark
    - ❑ e. It seems to work for other people I know

❏ f. I've always done my work this way
❏ g. Teachers don't know or care
❏ h. I don't care
❏ i. None of the above
❏ j. Other (specify) _____

7. If you were to use a source(s) as your own for a paper, what would you use? **(Check all that apply):**
   ❏ a. Internet
   ❏ b. Someone else's paper
   ❏ c. Book/magazine
   ❏ d. Other (specify) _____
   ❏ e. Not applicable

8. What type of punishment should students have when they are caught plagiarizing?
   ❏ a. None
   ❏ b. Warning
   ❏ c. Failing grade on paper
   ❏ d. Failing grade in class
   ❏ e. Must take class in how to write without plagiarizing
   ❏ f. Suspension or expulsion from school
   ❏ g. Other (specify) _____